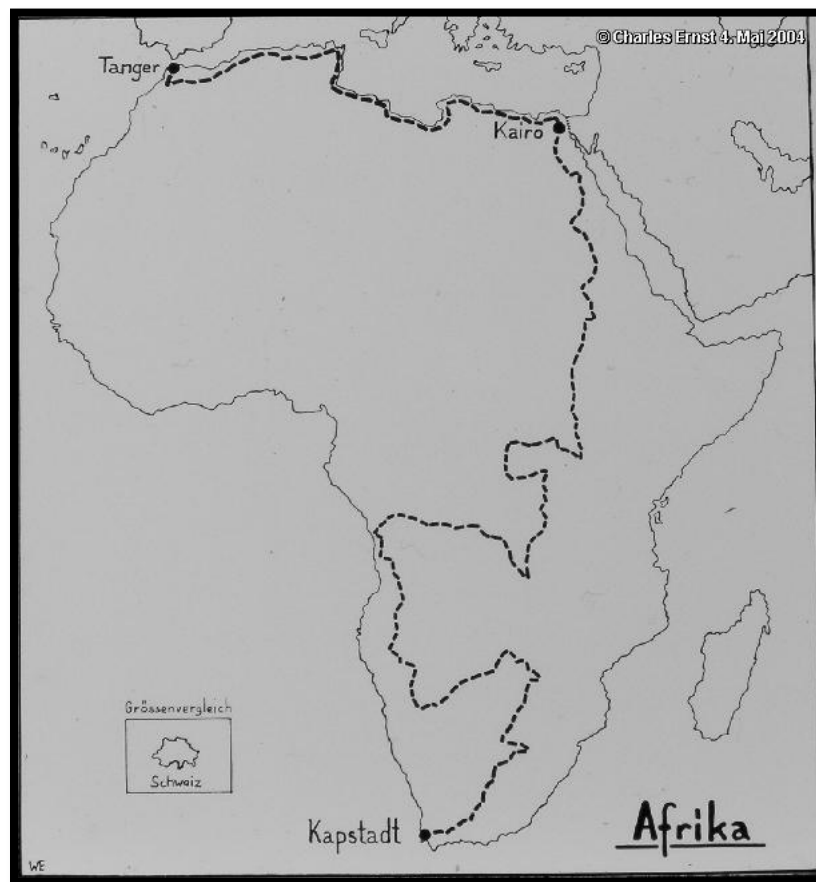


First Africa North-South Crossing by Car

Swiss Globetrotters' Trans-Africa Tour 1951-52

In March 2015 I tried to upload this report to Wikipedia. Editors removed it, citing lack of "encyclopedic relevance." Well, I believe the record of this tour, covering 42,000 kilometres in 1951/52, is relevant. Therefore I decided to make it available on Archive.org, including pictures for proof. My cousin digitally restored them. Secondary sources on the journey remain scarce. I included one of them for the record.

During the early 1950s four musicians from Basel, Switzerland, the three Ernst brothers (Charles, Werner and Marcel) and their friend, Willy Grieder, travelled through colonial Africa on a route never before chosen by Europeans, covering over 42,000 kilometres, the circumference of the earth.



Werner (1927-2005) documented the journey with photographs. They financed the trip with performances for prominent Africans, including King Farouk of Egypt. After enduring severe hardships on the way, including a brush with death when their car, a 1934 Buick, got hopelessly stuck in the mud, they reached the Cape of Good Hope in South Africa, where their journey ended.

Back in Basel they presented slide shows on the trip, entitled *Africa: Earth – Hell – Paradise*. The photographs taken provide a fascinating snapshot of late colonial Africa. For the following five decades the four gathered each year in October to mark the anniversary of their greatest adventure.

Preparations

Charles Ernst (1923-2008) was the manager and drummer of the group. He prepared for the journey months in advance, writing letters and booking a few dates. The band had obtained some prominence due to Werner's composition of a March for the 1950 Tour de Suisse, which the four performed at that events' beginning in June.

Werner, who played the clarinet, piano, guitar and mandolin, would record the trip and keep a diary. Marcel (1928-2013), who played the violin and trumpet, cooked the meals, took care of first aid, and also served as chauffeur. Willy Grieder (1928-2009), an accordion player, served as the mechanic and second chauffeur.



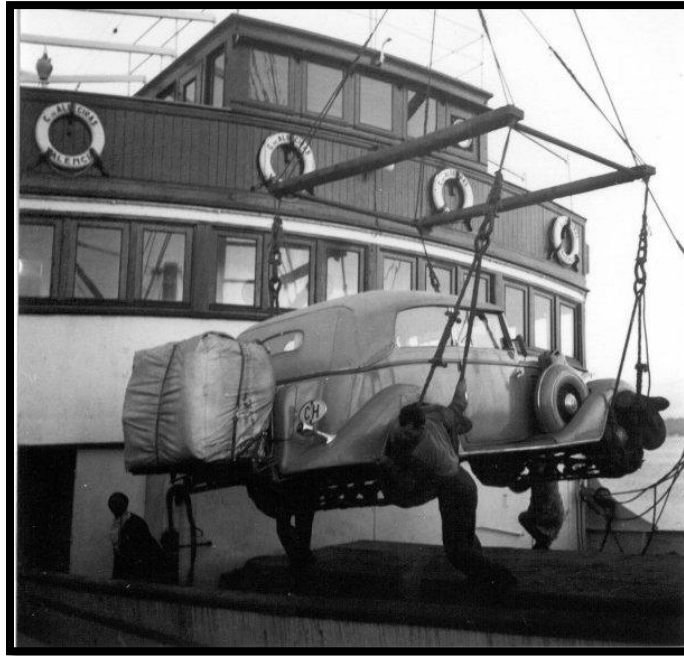
From left to right: Willy, Werner, Charles and Marcel

The shortage of services in Africa forced them to be mostly self-sufficient. Therefore they took along many supplies, including four spare tires and spare parts for the car. They chose a 1934 Buick as their vehicle for the trip, particularly because its chassis had a lot of clearance. On the other hand, the car was not a four-wheel drive, which made their passage in the bush more difficult. Part of their luggage also included Swiss *Trachten*, traditional Bernese outfits for show

purposes. The four did not take along much money, but were hoping to earn enough along the way on the assumption that African “high society” would take an interest in Swiss-style music.

Getting There

The group left Basel on Friday, October 13, 1950, undeterred by the bad luck symbolism of that date. They drove southward through France, then continued through Spain towards the southernmost spot, Algeciras. At that port they had their Buick hauled onto a ship for the crossing to Tangiers, Morocco.



Tangiers was a Spanish colonial hub at the time, with wide sidewalks, paved roads and modern flat-roof buildings several stories high. Werner also documented traditional dresses with veils, and Berbers riding on donkeys. Bustling public markets testified to the vitality of the place.

North Africa

Turning south towards Rabat, the four embarked on their long-term road trip. The roads were excellent to begin with. In Medina they visited a pottery and a shoemaking business. After Meknes they continued through the Atlas Mountains towards the port city of Algiers, Algeria. Werner's pictures reveal a prosperous city. Three days later they reached Costantine in the southeast, a historic town with impressive bridges. In their slide show they praised the roads (built under French management) that led them to Tunis, calling them the “best in Africa.” There they visited an Arabic museum, Alaoni, where Werner took pictures of sophisticated artworks, including several wall paintings. Before they left Tunis, a soothsayer named Achmed Mohammed Abubok predicted much luck and success.

Next they visited Carthage, considered the richest city in the world in the 2nd century BC, but destroyed afterwards during wartime. From there they turned south along the edge of the Sahara desert, encountering herds of camels along the way. In their presentation they called it

the African trinity: desert, oasis, and caravans. But the roads they encountered continued to be excellent, some of them lined with tall palm trees.



With worsening roads came the need for repeated tire changes. The globetrotters also carried 140 litres of extra fuel and a corresponding amount of oil and water. In the desert region they passed hundreds of thousands of destroyed pieces of military hardware from World War II – vehicles and equipment. El Alamein, scene of one of the most famous battles, was among their pit stops, where they saw graveyards and posted warnings about remaining minefields.

They reached Cairo, the Capital of Egypt, where they visited the pyramids and performed for King Farouk. No picture record of that performance exists. But Werner's pictures depict life along the Nile delta, with boats, cattle, and the modest dwellings of residents, made of clay from the mighty river. He also photographed a local woman who did not have her face covered. Her husband chased her away and then asked Werner for payment.

In defiance of local laws, Werner also took photos of the Suez Canal, risking a jail term. He documented the labour-intensive problem of irrigating Egyptian fields as well, a task occasionally facilitated by oxen.

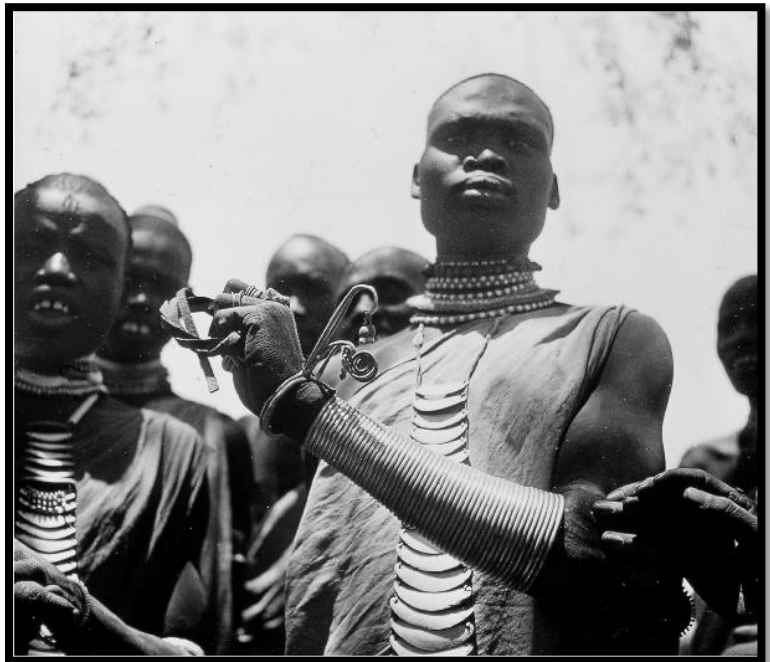
Turning south again by following the Nile delta, the four began encountering the "African Highways," roadways that only exist by virtue of passing vehicles, lacking asphalt or gravel. In Luxor they saw the famous temples of the Amon cult and related hieroglyphs. Then they passed the Aswan Dam, a marvel of engineering. In 1950 only the Aswan Low Dam, completed in 1902 existed. One of Werner's pictures shows the flooded landscape nearby, with palm trees sticking out of the water. They visited the stone temple Amon of Ramses II (1303-1213 BC), called "the Great," who had reigned as a divine ruler for 66 years.

Sub-Saharan Africa

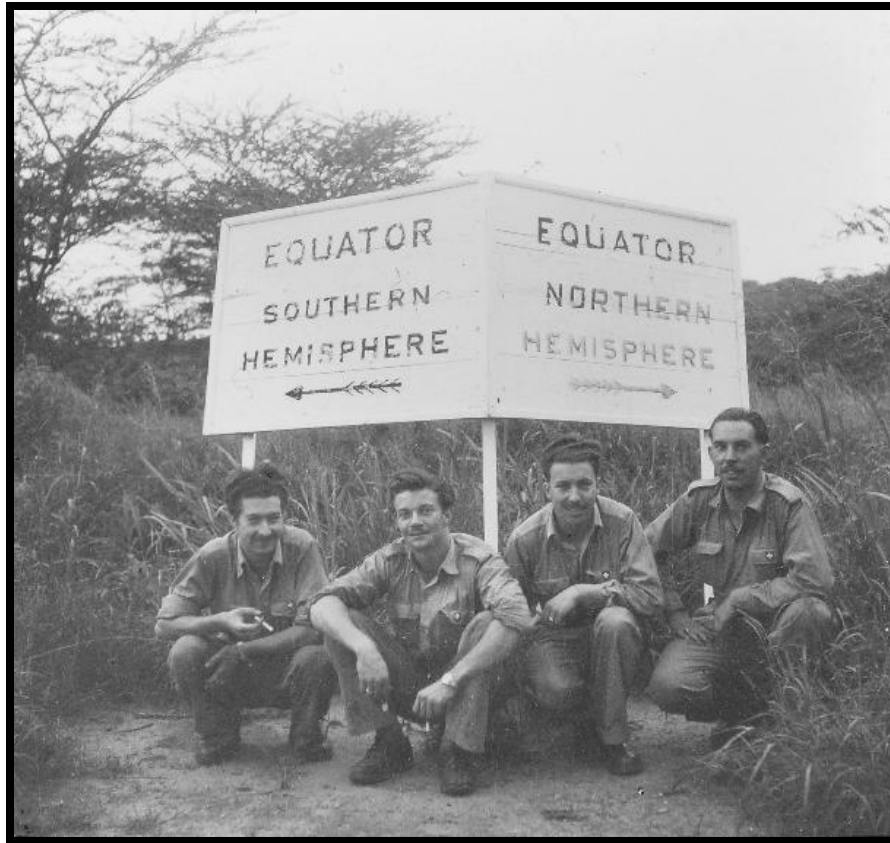
From there the globetrotters loaded their Buick onto a train for the 28 hour journey to Khartoum in the Sudan. They described a passage by road as “practically impossible.” Werner captured the splendour of Khartoum and Omdurman, as well as Sudan’s cash crop of the time, vast cotton fields. They continued their trip through the Sudanese steppe, enduring extreme heat. Along the way they encountered traditional straw villages, surrounded by fences made of wooden sticks, to keep wild animals out. They met the tall and slender Dinka people, apparently the only African tribe that did not wear any clothing at the time, who posed readily for pictures. Werner also snapped images of women who performed hard labour (the men hunted for the most part), carrying heavy loads including water and children.

At the Sobat crossing on the Upper Nile in South Sudan they loaded the car onto a delicate-looking wooden ferry. But there were some comforts as well. Werner documented rest houses the government had built for European travellers. Friendly villagers supplied the travellers with foodstuffs and other supplies.

In the Juba region they met a local chieftain’s son, who wore iron rings on his lower arm. They had been fastened when he was younger, so they had become too tight. Unfortunately the custom forbade removal or loosening, so he lived with a festering wound.



South of Juba a “Beware of Elephants” sign warned them against leaving the road, which was illegal. Elephants enjoyed some degree of protection; they could be hunted only after obtaining a special permit. Nonetheless (or perhaps for that reason), ivory was an official export item for the region. Near the equator the four worked for five hours to remove landslide debris that blocked their passage. Werner used a tripod to capture all four in an unkempt state at the sign demarking the equator:



Soon after they encountered a group of pygmy women, only about 1.3 metres tall, who, after initial hesitation, posed for pictures with them.

On the Uganda side of Lake Victoria Werner snapped a large group of butterflies that had settled down on the hood of the car. But not all insects were so benign. Termites build their mounds in the region, up to 12 metres high, and eat away at all wooden structures. The globetrotters also found a herd of hippos in the Congo River delta, in what was then the Belgian Congo. In Ikela they found people who continued to live a traditional existence, living in straw huts. Werner took pictures of Bantu women, some of whom filed their teeth like sharpened pencils. Villagers spread the word of the globetrotters' arrival by means of drums.

Further along they passed the active Nyragongo volcano, which had erupted in 1948 and brought the water of Lake Kivu to a boiling point. On the approach to Rwanda the roads became more treacherous, due to the geologic activity in the area. The travellers soon met some Tutsi tribes, who had migrated to the area from Ethiopia in the 15th century, and now dominated the region. Werner recorded the beautiful headgear members wore for a dancing competition. In that location they also met a fellow Swiss and long-time expat, who was friends with the tribe's vice-chief.

In Nyundo they stopped at a Congo mission, where locals managed the Catholic school, giving boys as well as girls a European-style education. The Belgian administration of the Congo had put their stamp on the country, with planned zoning and street networks. European farmers planted pineapple, among other introduced crops.

The adventure continued with Lake Tanganyika. In that region the globetrotters encountered some of the excesses of late colonial Africa. In Luluaburg about 1000 Europeans had built a

settlement that included an airport, hospital, swimming facility, cinemas and several bars. In the Capital Leopoldville they noted structural deficiencies in architecture; Werner took a picture of a collapsed multi-level building, where the architect had forgotten to include a foundation.



Newspaper announcement of a performance in Elisabethville (now Lubumbashi, Republic of Congo)

They reached the port of Boma in the Congo's southwestern corner, a major export hub for bananas at the time. Their journey southward continued through Angola, where swamp-like soils almost sealed their fate. In Santa de Banbeira Werner took a picture of a beautiful white church built for Europeans, with Christian crosses on top. They were forced to cross the swollen Kunene River; taking a whole day to cover an area of 4 kilometres. Shortly afterwards the Buick got stuck in the mud, breaking off the muffler in the process. They camped out for the night and obtained some help in the morning, which enabled them to continue their drive.

But road conditions in the border area between Angola and Southwest Africa were horrible. It was not long before their car became stuck again, this time in thick underbrush. The four laboured until their hands bled – all efforts to break free failed. For five days the globetrotters tried to get the Buick going, sweating in the blistering heat, with only two days of rations. On the morning of day four they had run out of water, after having perused the rusty liquid in the car's cooling system. On the morning of day six they had almost given up, when they heard a noise in the distance. It was a road motor service that crossed Owambo County every 14 days, transporting workers.



Rescue in the bush

The chauffeur pulled the Buick out with his large truck and gave the globetrotters some water. However, the gas pump was damaged in the process, so one of the four had to operate the pump by hand on the way to Windhoek.

They travelled another 5,000 kilometres from Livingstone to Johannesburg, and finally to Cape Town. Along the way they photographed themselves at Victoria Falls. In Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) asphalt stripes on the road facilitated their passage.

Werner's photo of Johannesburg shows a downtown street with a double-decker streetcar, surrounded by cars and commercial buildings, clearly a symbol of prosperity.



Near Cape Town he captured a giant dog-shaped guest house, with the dog in front and the owner living in the oversized doghouse behind. The final images captured the south coast of Cape Town (below), the destination, and the car. The Buick was left on the local scrapheap, driven into the ground by 42,000 kilometres of mostly challenging terrain.



Aftermath

The Ernst Brothers and Willy Grieder never forgot the greatest adventure of their lives. Every year they reunited in October to mark the anniversary of their departure, occasionally performing songs for their families. In 1980, on the occasion of the 30th trip anniversary, Werner typed up some reflections. He made reference to a case containing mementos that the four had left buried deep in the African bush. Perhaps someone has found it in the meantime.



Performing in the 1970s: (left to right) Werner, Marcel and Willy

Conclusion

It is tempting to portray the Africa of the early 1950s in terms of *the good old days*. But this was certainly not the case. Hell occupied a substantial portion of African life. Many regions withered away under the scorching heat. Shortages of water (then as now) caused draught and deaths of humans and animals. Occasionally, monsoon-like rains flooded regions and brought most road transport to a standstill. In addition, tropical diseases – which in later years could be controlled by medications – ravaged populations. Bilharzias, caused by tapeworms in waterways, made life miserable, particularly for young people, sometimes killing them. Today, pills can prevent any ill effects of that disease.

Colonial rulers governed most countries. The bulk of their efforts were aimed at promoting trade in precious foodstuffs and other raw materials through cultivation and export. Missionaries sought to improve African lives with European schools. But the pictures of the Swiss globetrotters show the autonomy of indigenous peoples, whose ways of life and customs had little in common with Europe.

The Africa captured by the globetrotters was probably more peaceful than today. However, colonial rulers had largely neglected to consider local conditions when drawing up borders, thus sowing the seeds of post-independence conflict and contributing to the subsequent militarization of the continent.